

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE July 9, 2009 WASHINGTON – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)– responding to [a letter from Roxana Saberi](#), the Iranian-American journalist who spent almost four months in an Iranian cell–today demanded the release of seven Iranian Baha'i prisoners of conscience who are set to go on trial Saturday and could face the death penalty, noting that this particular action is just one manifestation of the much broader pattern and practice of the theocratically supported repression that marks Iran's current electoral crisis.

"In addition to the hundreds of Iranians who have been detained in the context of Iran's disputed presidential poll, many other 'security detainees' arrested long before the June election remain behind bars," wrote Miss Saberi in a letter to USCIRF requesting U.S. government intervention in the Baha'i case. "These Iranians and the authorities who have detained them need to know that the Iranian people's human rights are a matter of international concern."

"The elections in Iran last month have exposed the world to the cold realities about how the Iranian government regularly deals with dissent or views that are a perceived threat to the theocratic regime," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. For example, a senior cleric, Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, recently said in a Friday sermon that election demonstrators should be convicted and sentenced to death for "waging war against God."

The seven Baha'is to be tried, two of whom shared a cell with Miss Saberi, are charged under the jurisdiction of Branch 28 of Iran's Revolutionary Court, the same judicial process which convicted Miss Saberi in April. The Baha'is are accused of spying for Israel and other religious offenses.

"The charges against these imprisoned Baha'is are baseless and a pretext for the persecution and harassment of a disfavored religious minority. They should be released immediately," said Mr. Leo. "USCIRF urges the President and other leaders in the international community to speak out and call for the release of the seven Baha'i leaders, as the President did for Miss Saberi. These prisoners are in jail solely because of their religious identity, and have not been afforded any due process or direct access to legal representation."

On April 18, Miss Saberi was tried, convicted, and sentenced to eight years in prison on false espionage charges. After an international outcry, including statements by President Barack

Obama, Miss Saberi appealed the verdict and was released weeks later. Currently, in Iranian prisons are more than 30 members of the Baha'i community, which is banned from practicing its faith.

On July 6, 10 Nobel laureates, including former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, called on the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon to urge the release of political prisoners and appoint a special envoy to assess the Iranian elections and their aftermath. The letter noted the laureates' concern for 2003 Nobel peace laureate Shirin Ebadi, a human rights lawyer who is legal counsel for the seven Baha'is and has not been permitted access to her clients. "USCIRF urges Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon to appoint an envoy to investigate the elections and other instances of repression in Iran such as the impending Baha'i trial," said Leo.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress. To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov or (202) 523-3257
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